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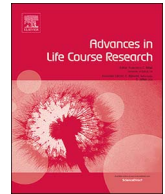
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# Pathways to commitment in living-apart-together relationships in the Netherlands: A study on satisfaction, alternatives, investments and social support

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## ABSTRACT

The non-institutionalised, flexible nature of living-apart-together (LAT) raises questions about partner commitment in the context of the debate about the individualisation of society. We explored how partner commitment in LAT relationships in the Netherlands is shaped by individuals' *satisfaction* with, *alternatives* to, *investments* in and *social support* for their relationship. The underlying theoretical framework is an extended version of the Investment Model of Commitment. We conducted 22 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with men and women. The major themes that were addressed in the analysis were commitment, satisfaction, alternatives, investments, social support, relationship history and future plans. Participants were emotionally highly attached to their partner, but they doubted their commitment to maintaining their relationship in the future. Satisfaction with the current partner and intrinsic investments, such as emotions and effort, were described as contributing the most to feelings of commitment. Social support, quality of alternatives and extrinsic investments, such as material ties, were felt to contribute the least. Relationship history and life experience played an important role in how middle-aged and older individuals, of whom many were divorced, perceived the four determinants and experienced commitment. In this context, the LAT arrangement expressed fear of commitment and getting hurt, which was further reflected in limited investments. The paper concludes that although emotional attachment appears to be high among people in LAT relationships, they may have a relatively limited belief and interest in life-long partnerships.

## 1. Introduction

Partner relationship arrangements have diversified profoundly in many western countries since the 1960s. Amongst other phenomena, this diversification revealed itself in a rise in unmarried cohabitation, divorce and extramarital childbirth (Lesthaeghe, 2010), and in the increased prevalence or visibility of living-apart-together (LAT) relationships (Carter, Duncan, Stoilova, & Phillips, 2015; Latten & Mulder, 2014). LAT refers to couple relationships in which the partners do not live together (Haskey, 2005). Remarkably, studies in a range of Western countries, including the Netherlands, all show that about 10% of all adults are in a LAT relationship (Asendorpf, 2008; Castro-Martín, Domínguez-Folgueras, & Martín-García, 2008; Haskey, 2005; Levin, 2004; Liefbroer, Poortman, & Seltzer, 2015; Lodewijckx & Deboosere, 2011; Otten & Te Riele, 2015; Régnier-Loilier, Beaujouan, & Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2009; Reimondos, Evans, & Gray, 2011; Strohm, Seltzer, Cochran, & Mays, 2009). The changes in partner relationships can be

seen as indicative of a de-institutionalisation of family life (Hantrais, 2006) and of marriage (Cherlin, 2004) and to be characterised by an increasing emphasis on individual autonomy and self-fulfilment, tolerance for diversity and respect for individual choice (Lesthaeghe, 2010).

The new and de-standardised family models that have arisen suggest, according to some, that commitment is less important in modern, individualised societies (Carter et al., 2015). Commitment refers to a sense of being emotionally attached and wanting to maintain a relationship in the future (Rusbult, 1980). In popular discourse, unmarried cohabitation is often viewed as evidence of this decreasing commitment to life-long partnerships (Duncan, Barlow, & James, 2005; Jamieson et al., 2002). People in LAT relationships (so-called "LATs") arguably show even less commitment than cohabiters. Their relationships typically lack structural investments, such as a joint mortgage or children (Carter et al., 2015), which are public expressions of commitment. At the same time, this lack of structural investments makes

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LAT relationships relatively easy to exit.

On the contrary, it is sometimes argued by cohabiters (Duncan et al., 2005) and LATs (Carter et al., 2015) that their relationships involve higher levels of commitment compared to married couples, precisely due to the lack of formal, legal and structural barriers to separation. Their sole reason for staying together is wanting to be together. Essentially, high and low commitment can be present in all types of relationships (Carter et al., 2015). In view of the changing nature and meanings of partner relationships, partner commitment is an important element in the scientific debate about the individualisation of society. It also carries great societal relevance, considering that those in more committed relationships report higher well-being (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). For these reasons, several studies thus far have investigated commitment in married and cohabiting relationships (Berrington, Perelli-Harris, & Trevena, 2015; Burgoyne, Reibstein, Edmunds, & Routh, 2010; Duncan et al., 2005; Hiekel & Keizer, 2015; Jamieson et al., 2002).

However, despite the increasing academic attention for LAT individuals as a significant category in society, little is known about commitment in LAT relationships. Only two studies have addressed this topic, both in Britain: Carter et al. (2015) and Haskey and Lewis (2006). Our current knowledge about LATs' commitment remains very limited and aforesaid studies fail to provide a detailed investigation of the factors underlying commitment in LAT relationships.

The aim of this study is to explore the concept of commitment and its underlying mechanisms in LAT relationships, in order to obtain a better understanding of the meanings of living-apart-together as a modern, non-institutionalised partner relationship arrangement. We address the following questions: *What shapes the partner commitment experiences of those in LAT relationships? And how is their commitment interlinked with their choice for LAT and future plans for their relationship?* As a framework for understanding the mechanisms underlying commitment, we employ an extended version of the Investment Model of Commitment (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2011; Sprecher, 1988). This model predicts high commitment when one feels satisfied with the relationship, perceives few attractive alternatives, has invested significantly and receives social support for the relationship.

In the European context, the Netherlands is a fairly individualistic, secularised and prosperous country, but with relatively conservative, Calvinistic family values and behaviours (Felling, Peters, & Scheepers, 2000). In terms of its welfare regime, it can be classified as social-democratic (Esping-Andersen, 2013). Several new demographic trends tend to appear early in the Netherlands (Latten & Mulder, 2014), even though the country is rather mainstream in Europe regarding many other demographic patterns.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Previous literature

The novelty of LAT relationships is debatable and depends on the way LAT is defined. So-called “dating LATs”, distinguished by Duncan and Phillips (2010, 2011); Duncan and Phillips, 2010 from “partner LATs”, resemble the more traditional boyfriend-girlfriend relationships or steady dating relationships and are thus not notably novel. We adopt the definition proposed by Haskey (2005), which is similar to that of Levin and Trost (1999), in which LAT is more than just a new guise of dating relationships. In this definition, only partner LATs are included: those who see themselves, and are regarded as such by others, as an established couple for the long term, living in separate households. This identification as a couple, regardless of intentions to live together (see Lewin, 2017b), is what distinguishes partner LATs from dating relationships. The existing body of research has mostly concentrated on identifying who are in LAT relationships and why (Carter et al., 2015). These two questions are inextricably linked, in that the reasons for living apart vary with the individual's life course stage (Strohm et al.,

2009). For many young people, LAT is a stage in the union formation process, preceding cohabitation and/or marriage (Liefbroer et al., 2015; Strohm et al., 2009). They may not be ready for the perceived greater commitment associated with co-residence (Jamison & Ganong, 2011). Older adults may choose not to live with their partner because they are responsible for taking care of children or elderly parents with whom they live in the same household (Levin & Trost, 1999). For parents, living apart can be a way to protect and prioritise the relationship with their children (De Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013). Alternatively, people may live apart to avoid problems experienced in previous co-residential relationships and to maintain their independence (De Jong Gierveld, 2002, 2004; Levin & Trost, 1999; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009). Hence, LAT is relatively common among those who have been in a cohabiting or married relationship before and those who have children (De Jong Gierveld & Latten, 2008; Liefbroer et al., 2015). For women in particular, LAT can offer increased autonomy and control over resources (De Jong Gierveld, 2002; Upton-Davis, 2015), and caregiving responsibilities can be a reason to live apart. External constraints or circumstances (e.g. job locations) are another frequently mentioned reason to live apart (e.g. Levin & Trost, 1999; Liefbroer et al., 2015; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009; Roseneil, 2006). Findings by Krapf (2017) suggest that many long-distance dual-career couples are living apart involuntarily. More generally, living-apart-together can be a way to combine partner intimacy with the autonomy, flexibility and independence of being alone (Duncan, Carter, Phillips, Roseneil, & Stoilova, 2013; Strohm et al., 2009). Instead of a temporary stage only, LAT is therefore also sometimes characterised as a more permanent end-state, epitomising a new orientation towards couple relationships (Bawin-Legros & Gauthier, 2001; Levin, 2004; Roseneil, 2006).

Next to the who and why of LAT, a handful of studies has examined the relationship experiences of LAT couples. Two recent studies found that LAT couples are generally less satisfied with their relationship than married and cohabiting couples are (Lewin, 2017a; Tai, Baxter, & Hewitt, 2014). In a mixed-methods study in Britain, Duncan, Phillips, Carter, Roseneil, & Stoilova, 2014 reported that the relationship practices and perceptions of LAT couples are similar to co-resident couples in terms of sexual exclusivity, emotional closeness and commitment, but are different with respect to caregiving between partners, flexibility and autonomy. In another mixed-methods study in Britain, focussing particularly on commitment, Carter et al. (2015) explored how LATs discuss and experience five dimensions of commitment: a life course dimension, sexual exclusivity, love and longevity, moral and social expectations and relationship investments. They selected participants with a broad range of reasons for living apart and uncovered an equally broad range of perceptions of commitment. The authors distinguished between those with autonomous commitment (gladly apart, high commitment levels), contingent commitment (regretfully apart, high commitment levels contingent on living together in the future), ambivalent commitment (not yet ready to live together, some commitment) and limited commitment (LAT because it requires less commitment). They concluded that participants' stances on the importance of structural investments (such as shared housing) to commitment mainly determined the perception of their own commitment. Highly committed couples attached low value to shared investments, whereas those with ambivalent commitment expressed unwillingness to share the investments and responsibilities involved in cohabitation. This sort of ambivalent commitment was also identified by Haskey and Lewis (2006), in relation to the perceived risk associated with co-residence. Carter et al. (2015) conclude that commitment is an important element of LAT couples' experiences, although it depends on the motivation for LAT and thereby also on the relationship stage (i.e. whether a couple plans to cohabit and/or marry in the near future). Although extrinsic relationship investments are generally low, the authors stress that other elements of commitment can be of great significance in LAT relationships, and several of the LATs they interviewed reported high levels of commitment. Among their participants, living apart was not often a

matter of avoiding commitment.

Meanwhile, [Kamp Dush and Amato \(2005\)](#) argue that relationship statuses form a continuum of commitment, with casual dating relationships on one end and marriage on the other. Logically, on this continuum LAT relationships would be positioned below cohabitation and above dating relationships. The authors base their argument of a continuum of commitment on the future orientation of the relationship and the extent to which the relationship contributes fundamentally to a person's identity as a social role. Marriage, they assume, is the most salient basis for personal identity.

## 2.2. Investment model of commitment

Commitment in partner relationships can be defined as psychological attachment to the current partner, together with the desire to maintain this relationship in the future (long-term orientation; [Rusbult, 1980](#)). While cohabiting and married relationships involve significant investments that are public expressions of commitment (e.g. shared housing), LAT relationships do not and are easier to exit. Furthermore, as [Carter et al. \(2015\)](#) showed, investments are indeed important to understanding the commitment experiences of those in LAT relationships. It therefore seems appropriate to discuss commitment in LAT relationships along the lines of a theoretical model that centrally acknowledges the role of investments, or the lack thereof. According to [Rusbult's \(1980\)](#) and [Rusbult's et al. \(2011\)](#) Investment Model of Commitment, a person's commitment to a partner relationship is influenced by three factors: satisfaction, alternatives and investments. Satisfaction with the relationship is a function of rewards, costs and the individual's comparison level. Therefore, if partners spend much enjoyable time together (i.e. receive ample rewards), while seeing few negative qualities in their partner (i.e. incur few costs) and have low expectations due to unpleasant prior relationships (i.e. have a low comparison level), they should be relatively satisfied ([Rusbult, 1983](#)). The perceived quality of available alternatives to the relationship, for example singlehood or an alternative partner, influences commitment as well. Investments are resources that are lost or decline in value when the relationship ends, and can be intrinsic, extrinsic or planned for the future. Intrinsic investments are devoted to the relationship directly, for example in the form of time, effort and emotions. Extrinsic investments are initially unconnected resources that have grown to be inseparable from the relationship, such as mutual friends or a house. Investments increase the costs of ending a relationship and consequently induce commitment. Mostly quantitative, but also qualitative, empirical evidence from numerous studies on a range of inter-personal relationships supports the validity of this theoretical framework. An alternative model of commitment, originally developed to explain the stability of married relationships, is [Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston's \(1999\)](#) tripartite typology of personal, moral, and structural commitment. This typology clearly overlaps with Rusbult's components ([Agnew, 2009](#)).

[Sprecher \(1988\)](#), and later others (e.g. [Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004](#)), proposed to add social support as a fourth factor influencing commitment. When friends and family approve of and support a relationship, commitment can be expected to be greater ([Sprecher, 1988](#)). If this is the case, one would want to live up to the expectations of important others and would feel prohibited to end, and encouraged to continue the current relationship. A final extension to the original Investment Model is to consider not only past but also planned investments, as suggested by [Goodfriend and Agnew \(2008\)](#). The potential loss of cherished plans for the future (e.g. having children together) can motivate individuals to commit to the continuation of their relationship.

## 3. Data and methods

### 3.1. Method

To understand LATs' perceptions of commitment and their

evaluations of satisfaction, alternatives, investments and social support regarding their relationship, 22 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals in LAT relationships in May and June 2016. Partner relationships are a sensitive topic and commitment is a complex issue; one-to-one interviews allowed for the required nuance, detail and context ([Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011](#)). Despite attentiveness to contradictions and doubt, it remains difficult to pinpoint and tackle issues of social desirability and reduction of cognitive dissonance in participants' answers; this has been taken into account in the interpretation of the results.

The interview guide was structured along central themes (relationship history, motivations for living apart, satisfaction, alternatives, investments, social support, commitment and future plans), while it simultaneously allowed the interviewer to follow the natural flow of the interview and to adapt to the circumstances and participants' answers. The average duration of the interviews was 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in the Dutch language by the first author of this paper and recorded on tape with the written consent of the participants.

### 3.2. Operationalisation of concepts

The key concepts were operationalised using Rusbult's Investment Model of Commitment as a guideline. Commitment was explored by asking participants about their emotional attachment to their partner and how important they found the future continuation of their relationship. Satisfaction was discussed along the lines of rewards and costs of the relationship, in comparison to previous relationship experiences. Next, participants were presented with the question what they saw as the most attractive alternative (e.g. singlehood or a different partner) to their current situation, and how attractive and realistic this alternative was. Although these questions may have been difficult to answer, and participants may have possibly given socially desirable answers, their answers provide an indication of how the LATs think about alternatives. The size of investments in the relationship was operationalised as investments of time, effort and emotions (intrinsic) as well as shared possessions, contacts and activities (extrinsic) that would be lost if the relationship were to end. Lastly, social support was operationalised as the perceived (dis)approval of the current partner by friends and family, as well as how important this was to the respondent.

### 3.3. Research participants

The study population consisted of adult LATs as defined by [Haskey \(2005\)](#), which are individuals in longer-term, monogamous relationships, who considered themselves as part of a couple and were regarded as such by others as well, and who lived in separate households. This tight definition excludes relationships of married people, even when they do not share a residence. Those who consider themselves as cohabiting, but who maintain a second residence in which one partner lives part of the time (commuter partnerships – [Van der Klis & Mulder, 2008](#)), were also excluded. To meet the criterion "long-term", individuals were selected who had been in their relationship for at least six months; this threshold was also used by [Ermisch \(2000\)](#) and [Duncan and Phillips \(2008\)](#). As it turned out, all recruited individuals had been in their relationship for at least one year. Those who planned to cohabit within the next six months were also excluded, because we thought their experiences would be coloured by their plans. Young adults and teenagers living with their parents as well as those in full-time education were excluded, because they are not in a position of full responsibility for maintaining their own household and deciding where to live ([Haskey, 2005](#)). Finally, individuals in same-sex couples were excluded.

Participants were recruited via advertising through recruitment flyers in the Dutch and English language and by personally approaching people in shops and supermarkets, via the first author's personal network and via snowballing from several existing contacts. All but three

**Table 1**  
Participant characteristics.

Sex	Age (years)	Education	Rural/urban	Relationship duration (years)	Distance to partner (km)	Parental status	Relationship history
Female	20–34	Higher vocational	Urban	1–4	< 5	No children	Never co-residential
Female	20–34	University	Urban	5–9	100–200	No children	Prior co-residential
Female	20–34	Higher vocational	Urban	5–9	< 5	No children	Never co-residential
Female	20–34	University	Urban	1–4	< 5	No children	Never co-residential
Male	20–34	University	Urban	1–4	100–200	No children	Prior co-residential
Female	20–34	University	Urban	1–4	> 350	No children	Prior co-residential
Male	20–34	University	Urban	1–4	> 350	No children	Prior co-residential
Male	20–34	University	Urban	5–9	> 350	No children	Prior co-residential
Male	20–34	University	Urban	1–4	> 350	No children	Prior co-residential
Female	35–54	Higher vocational	Urban	1–4	100–200	No children	Prior co-residential
Female	35–54	Lower education	Urban	≥ 10	< 5	Joint children	Never co-residential
Female	35–54	University	Urban	1–4	< 5	Own children	Divorced
Female	35–54	University	Urban	1–4	< 5	Own children	Divorced
Male	35–54	Higher vocational	Rural	1–4	15–25	Own children	Divorced
Female	35–54	Higher vocational	Rural	5–9	100–200	Own children	Divorced
Male	35–54	Higher vocational	Urban	5–9	< 5	Own children	Divorced
Female	35–54	Higher vocational	Rural	≥ 10	100–200	Joint children	Prior co-residential
Female	55–70	Higher vocational	Urban	1–4	15–25	Own children	Divorced
Male	55–70	Higher vocational	Urban	5–9	< 5	Own children	Divorced
Male	55–70	Higher vocational	Urban	≥ 10	< 5	Joint children	Prior co-residential
Male	55–70	Lower education	Urban	5–9	15–25	No children	Divorced and widowed
Female	55–70	Lower education	Urban	5–9	< 5	Own children	Prior co-residential

Notes: a prior co-residential relationship could be either with an ex or current partner.

participants were residents of the Dutch province of Groningen, which was where the advertisements were spread and the personal network was largely located. More urban than rural participants were recruited; research shows that LATs are relatively likely to live in urban areas (Strohm et al., 2009). Because LATs living in rural areas might experience different normative pressures, three participants living in rural areas were purposively recruited. Purposive recruitment further allowed for the selection of a similar number of men and women and a diverse participant group in terms of age, life course stage, geographical distance between partners, relationship duration and motivation to live apart. This diversity (see Table 1) enabled us to obtain a wide variety of experiences and to draw comparisons. None of the participants classified him- or herself as religious, and all participants were of Dutch origins.

### 3.4. Analysis

Verbatim, anonymised transcripts of the interviews were coded both deductively and inductively using the qualitative data analysis software program Atlas.ti. Deductive codes were derived from the theoretical framework and supplemented by inductive codes derived from the data. The inductive codes (e.g. influence of relationship history) indicate unanticipated topics and explanations and allow the data “to speak for themselves” (Hennink et al., 2011). The codes enabled data analysis by topic and code families (e.g. investments) and by subgroup (e.g. younger or older) (Hennink et al., 2011). The major code families were: motivations for living-apart-together, commitment, satisfaction, alternatives, investments, social support, future plans and relationship history. Two subcategories of participants were derived from the data inductively, that represent different stages of the life course: one category was younger of age and childfree (N = 10), the other category was older and had more relationship experience, often involving marriage, children and divorce (N = 12). This distinction is similar to the subcategories of LATs distinguished by Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Commitment and future plans

No clear gender differences in commitment experiences arose that were independent of other factors, such as relationship history or

motivation to live apart, and neither did it appear that motivations to live apart were different for women than for men. For this reason, no explicit distinction is made between males and females in reporting the results.

Noticeably, the younger participants expressed great emotional attachment to their partner, both those who gladly lived apart because they were not ready to cohabit and those who regretfully lived apart due to external circumstances. Although essentially all these younger participants expressed a desire to continue the relationship in the future, only few of them said without hesitation that this was very important to them. Rather, they expressed some form of uncertainty or openness about this long-term orientation component of commitment. They did not want to fixate on the future of their relationship or on wanting to stay together forever, because they were aware that things do not always go as planned, referring also to the high divorce rate. Alternatively, they had a rather open stance towards the future. The following quote from Maggie (20–34) represents similar thoughts held by many of the other young participants:

*If feelings change, either his or mine, and the relationship simply no longer works, then I won't be the person to hang on to that, to be flogging a dead horse, so to speak. When it's done, it's done, as far as I'm concerned*

They believed that a relationship would not be right if it would require great effort to make things work. In that sense, it appears that personal satisfaction and love were central in their relationships, rather than the notion of a life-long partnership for good and bad. The following citation exemplifies this:

*I am actually only committed to what feels right for me. [...] If it would be that something that feels right for me and feels right for him means that we are not together, then that is where my commitment lies, really. So in that sense I am actually not committed to the relationship. Because for me that's not something, that's an empty shell so to say. If you start working on a relationship, yeah, what is it that you are working on?* (Hester, 20–34)

The ideas that younger and childfree participants expressed about the future reflected the illustrated open-mindedness and/or uncertainty about the longer term of their current relationship. LAT was a temporary arrangement for all of them. They wanted a cohabiting relationship at some point in the future, when they were ready and able.



In several cases this wish was related to their desire to have children; co-residence was seen as a necessary step when having children. Nevertheless, when they wanted to start co-residence was usually not considered and with whom did not seem central to all. Marriage did not appear to be a central part of the future they envisaged. Only few of them said that they would possibly marry in the future.

Among the older participants, there was more diversity in commitment experiences. It is largely the way in which people were affected by their relationship history and life experience that explains this diversity. They highly valued their regained freedom and independence after a long and often married previous relationship. In addition, many admitted that they were afraid to commit and trust again after their separation or divorce, and did not want to experience that pain all over. Some of those who felt this way were able to let go of their reserves and fear of commitment after a few years in their new relationship, and were in fact very emotionally attached to their partner (“more than I would want to admit”, Hilde, 35–54) and also oriented towards the future of their relationship (“I completely believe in it”, Bert, 35–54). However, for most, relationship history had repercussions in the form of limited commitment and/or hesitation to develop a relationship further. For example, after several failed relationships, Henk (55–70) simply lacked the energy to go all-in again in his current relationship. His limited emotional attachment (separation would have a “light impact, but not a blast”) can thus be attributed to his relationship experience. For many others, fear of commitment and getting hurt again negatively influenced both their emotional attachment and long-term orientation. Among them, a few consciously and successfully avoided growing too attached to their partner, for example by not planning too far ahead in the future and thereby reducing the potential pain of (another) separation. Most others found themselves affected by their relationship history without intending this to be the case, particularly in their long-term orientation. For example, although Mark (55–70) felt emotionally attached, he always kept a “what if the relationship ends tomorrow” scenario in mind and had a “we’ll see what it becomes” and “go with the flow” attitude. Similarly, Astrid (35–54) could never believe in “forever” again and was therefore less oriented towards the future of her relationship:

*With my ex-husband, when I married I thought “with him I will stay forever”. But that idea is now in rags for good. [...] This is now forever a matter of “we’ll see”.*

Not only relationship experience, but also age and broader life experience reduced older LATs’ long-term orientations. For example, Henk (55–70) had learnt to take life as it comes:

*I always find it so strange when people say, “I hope I will stay with you forever”. [...] I don’t have that desire. [...] You don’t know how things will go. Life is full of surprises and I like surprises.*

Several other older participants attributed it to their age that they lived by the day and did not look too far into the future:

*Look, we are of course no longer the youngest, you know. We don’t look ahead that far anymore. We are more like, let’s just enjoy every day. [...] We’ll see again tomorrow. (Bob, 55–70)*

A somewhat surprising finding is that whereas several older participants’ choice for LAT was based on fear of commitment, for Hanna (35–54) and Astrid (35–54) the choice for LAT was in fact based on high commitment. Precisely because they wanted their relationship to continue in the future, they chose to live separately from their partner, believing that cohabiting would not be beneficial to their relationship and might result in a break-up.

Many older participants were certain that they wanted to remain living apart in the future. Others could see themselves cohabiting someday, but were uncertain when. Of these, several expressed a desire to maintain some element of LAT or retain their own place, even when living together. They called this their “escape option” or “back-up

plan”.

*She [partner] then makes those plans of “later when we live together”, and then she knows that in my mind the word ‘Never!’ immediately pops up. [...] I would not choose to give up those things so quickly anymore. Or give up, I do leave room for, you know, there has to be an escape. So when my children have left home in four years, then I will keep my little house. And then it might just be that I spend whole weeks at hers, but that little house remains for a while. (Robert, 35–54)*

Marriage was not included in the future plans of the older participants. Only Hanna (35–54) considered marrying, desiring to counter-balance what had become a non-romantic image of love by time and experience. Lewin’s (2017b) findings on intentions to live together also suggested that traditional partnership arrangements are rejected more by older LATs than by younger LATs.

The categorisation by Carter et al. (2015) into those with autonomous commitment (gladly apart, high commitment levels), contingent commitment (regretfully apart, high commitment levels contingent on living together in the future), ambivalent commitment (not yet ready to live together, some commitment) and limited commitment (LAT because it requires less commitment) largely covers the range of experiences found in this study. However, a nuance we would like to make is that among those regretfully living apart there were also LATs with a somewhat open or uncertain stance about the future of their relationship. Furthermore, some of those who were not ready to cohabit yet were nevertheless highly, not ambivalently, committed.

Carter et al. (2015) conclude that commitment is an important element of LAT couples’ experiences, although levels of commitment depend on the motivation for LAT and thereby also on relationship stage (i.e. whether they plan to cohabit and/or marry in the future). Besides relationship stage, it seems that levels of commitment also strongly depend on life experience and relationship history.

#### 4.2. Satisfaction

In their stories about the perceived influence of the four determinants of commitment, the participants usually did not make a distinction between the two components of commitment: emotional attachment and long-term orientation. Unless mentioned otherwise, we therefore use commitment from here onwards as a general term referring to a combination of both components.

From the participants’ accounts, it became clear that relationship satisfaction (either higher or lower satisfaction) was important to their experiences of commitment and the choice to live apart. The rewarding aspects of a relationship and positive qualities of a partner were said to increase commitment to that partner. For example, Mark (55–70) felt more committed because he greatly enjoyed sexual intimacy with his partner, which he would miss if the relationship were to end. Costly or negative aspects of a relationship seemed to affect younger and older participants differently. Mostly for younger participants, feelings of commitment were diminished by relationship costs, such as negative partner qualities or potential future sacrifices related to dreams that could not be realised with the current partner. For the older participants, who had more relationship experience and history, these costs generally left their feelings of commitment unaffected; they tended no longer to believe in the perfect relationship, and to accept their partners as they were.

*I used to have quite some demands, but in my marriage I have learnt to set those demands aside and simply adjust; that works best. (Bob, 55–70)*

At the same time, for many participants – regardless of their age –, negative partner qualities contributed to the choice to live apart. This contribution was often indirect via commitment and (un)certainity about the relationship, but for others independent of that. Again especially for those older LATs who had learnt to accept their partners

as they were, certain personality traits made their partners difficult to live with and thus in part motivated their choice to live apart, independently of commitment. This was also the case for Hanna (35–54), who was very committed despite her partner's difficult qualities.

*His character very much makes him want to have control himself, so something like “shall I make your sandwich” is already too much. That seems pretty difficult to me if you live together.*

In contrast, Erik (20–34) experienced that the current perils with his partner made him uncertain about the future of his relationship, without this uncertainty affecting his emotional attachment or choice to live apart, because he did not perceive cohabitation as an irreversible step.

An additional linkage is in opposite direction, namely the influence of LAT on relationship satisfaction. Particularly for those whose partners regrettably lived away a long distance, several negative aspects of that situation reduced their relationship satisfaction. Also some with a partner closer by acknowledged the greater effort involved in maintaining a relationship when living-apart-together rather than cohabiting. On the other hand, others argued that LAT increased their relationship satisfaction:

*Because you don't see each other every day, it is nice every time that you do. (Hilde, 35–54)*

Hence, some participants believed that their satisfaction would remain higher when living separately, and were even worried that their relationship might not survive cohabitation.

The comparison level created by previous relationships is an element that is unique to the Investment Model (Agnew, 2009) and was indeed of great influence for some. Particularly those with a clearly low comparison level frequently compared elements in their current relationship for the better with a past relationship. This positively influenced their current relationship satisfaction, like it did for Willem (20–34):

*They [ex and current girlfriend] are really complete opposites in many regards. [...] There are very many things of which I now retrospectively think, yes that can be much easier, so to say. I only realised that when I got together with my current girlfriend.*

#### 4.3. Alternatives

Most participants said that they did not perceive an attractive alternative to their current relationships. They generally denied that this contributed to their commitment, for one or both of the following reasons. Firstly, although the perceived quality of alternatives was not high, alternatives were often perceived as neutral: many participants felt confident that they could find an alternative partner if needed, or had a neutral stance towards singlehood. Secondly and most importantly, they believed that feelings of partner commitment are unrelated to perceptions of alternatives. Rather, they believed that commitment is enhanced by satisfaction, and satisfaction influences perceptions of alternatives. Saskia (55–70) defended this as follows:

*Almost from a negative mechanism: there is no alternative, well then I find him nice. No, it's not like that. [...] We are good together, and so there is no alternative feeling. It's the other way around! I think that is different, because otherwise I would do injustice to my relationship. [...] Look, at the moment that you're not good in a relationship, you look at other men. I turn it around.*

Thus, in the participants' view, when satisfied with the current relationship, one does not even perceive the available alternatives. Conversely, when experiencing elements of dissatisfaction, one can feel attracted towards alternatives. This logic was confirmed both by younger and older, satisfied and somewhat unsatisfied participants.

While many participants thus denied any contribution of the quality

of alternatives to their commitment, others said they consciously did not allow a lack of alternatives to play a role. For example, Celine (35–54) felt pressure to fulfil her desire to have children soon because of her age. She said that despite this pressure, when she considered breaking up in the past because of a negative partner quality, she consciously refused to allow a lack of alternatives to influence her decision. Similar considerations had also crossed the mind of a younger participant:

*I have thought about it. You know, I'm almost 28, jeez if it ends now I have to start all over again. [...] But that can definitely not play a role and it will not either. (Erik, 20–34)*

As an exception, Maggie (20–34), Renee (20–34) and Mark (55–70) perceived high-quality alternatives independently of their relationship satisfaction. For them, singlehood or alternative partners could offer benefits (e.g. freedom to travel, excitement of new love) that a steady relationship could not. One of them admitted that this perception of a high-quality alternative played a minor role in the choice to live apart, and another that it reduced commitment to maintaining the relationship in the future.

Living apart can also affect perceptions of alternatives. For instance, Ilse's (20–34) partner has been travelling since they met, and when he is gone for long, she feels less connected to him and more open to alternatives. Astrid (35–54) experienced the same feeling in the beginning of her relationship, when she was less comfortable being on her own:

*One of my ideas about such a relationship [LAT] was that you had to see each other often, because otherwise I do not feel the connection anymore. [...] And when I did not see him for two weeks, [...] then by the end of that second week, I was just arguing with him in my mind, or I felt like, if I meet someone else now I could just as well continue with that, as if the whole relationship was no longer there or something.*

However, Astrid said that her emotional attachment was unrelated to her perception of alternatives, and was only influenced by her feelings about him, so in that sense again linking it back to satisfaction.

Younger and older LATs seemed to hold largely similar ideas on alternatives. One noticeable difference was that a few older participants linked their perceived lack of alternatives to age, due to which they deemed it less appropriate or realistic to consider alternatives. Also, more older than younger participants stated that a lack of alternatives increased their feelings of commitment to their current partner.

#### 4.4. Investments

Judging from the participants' stories, the third determinant, investments, seems to be very relevant for understanding commitment in LAT relationships. Among younger LATs, intrinsic investments (e.g. emotions, time, effort) were generally high. The situation of living apart, and the distance in particular, affected such investments. Those younger participants with a partner at close distance spent a large part of the week with their partner, and thus invested much time in their relationship. They had emotionally invested in their relationship, and explained this largely on the basis that they could share anything with their partner. Their emotional investment increased their feelings of commitment. Oppositely, commitment can also lead to greater intrinsic investment, as the following quote clarifies:

*It feels like a waste to let a relationship fall apart like that, because we did not put in enough effort. (Maaïke, 20–34)*

Because Maaïke was committed to maintaining her relationship, she was willing to invest more in order not to let past investments go to waste.

Those with a long-distance relationship in addition emphasised the time, effort and money invested because of the travelling involved. On the other hand, a long distance can negatively affect emotional investments. Matthijs (20–34) experienced this effect regrettably:

*I find it difficult to empathise with what happens with my girlfriend at work or in her city, because we are at such a distance. So I'm less emotionally involved because a way for us to really, to be very involved, is cuddling.*

Alternatively, René (20–34) was consciously somewhat reserved in his emotional investments because of the long-distance aspect of his relationship, to limit the pain when parting again.

*I do invest emotionally, and yet I also protect myself somewhat, [...] because I always know there will be a long period again in which you do not see each other.*

The size of extrinsic investments was limited for most younger LATs. Those who did have joint resources (often of a social and sometimes material nature) or plans for future investments (e.g. children) that would be lost in case of separation, said that these did not add to their commitment. Some participants very consciously did not want to experience commitment for such investment reasons. For instance, Femke (20–34) found it important to stay financially independent, so that she would never feel forced to stay with her partner for financial reasons. Willem (20–34) felt that the total enrichment his relationship offers him, which is bigger than his partner alone, does contribute to his commitment:

*She is a sort of hub to which all sorts of important things to me are now connected. And if I break that connection with her, everything is lost.*

Among older participants, the influence of relationship history was clearly reflected in the limited size of investments in their relationship. Regained freedom and independence after separation were highly valued. At the same time, the pain caused by previous separation(s) has created some fear of commitment and sense of realism and awareness of a potential break-up scenario, like for Astrid (35–54):

*I realise that is always on my mind, the fact that it has gone wrong.*

For that reason, she tried to limit the material consequences of separation:

*I would want to make agreements on what to do with it [joint purchases] in case it does go wrong or something. (Astrid, 35–54)*

For several other older participants, living apart was to some degree motivated by the desire to avoid extrinsic investments and ties, or to keep financial control, for example after a financially costly divorce. Bert's story (Box 1) exemplifies discomfort to invest too greatly in a relationship, originating from fear of commitment.

By limiting multiple forms of investments, several older participants purposively tried to limit their commitment, both the emotional attachment to their partner and the importance of the future continuation of their relationship. In so doing, they aimed to reduce the consequences of a potential future separation. Maintaining one's own, safe

place by living apart was for them one way of shaping this. Astrid (35–54) explained this by drawing a comparison with cohabitation:

*I think that if you move in together, you get used to that of course, having someone around. I really do not want to experience that once more, losing someone again.*

In relation to this, Robert (35–54) said with relief about his own LAT situation:

*If this would stop, she could just pick up her life again and so could I.*

Even when living together someday in the future, several participants wanted to have an “escape option” or “back-up plan”. Divorced interview participants in a study by Haskey and Lewis (2006) also mentioned anxiety and caution as reasons to live apart; LAT allowed them an easy retreat in case of separation. Similarly, research by De Jong Gierveld (2002) indicates the strong influence of relationship history on the choice of living arrangement with a (new) partner. However, she mostly mentioned autonomy and independence as motivations to live apart for divorcees, not fear of commitment and getting hurt. For the participants in the study by Carter et al. (2015), LAT was seldom a strategy to avoid commitment, whereas it was in fact so for several of this study's participants. A possible explanation is that Carter et al. (2015) had a relatively young study sample.

Next to living apart, some older LATs purposively restrained themselves from investing in other ways. For example, Robert (35–54) consciously avoided planning future investments, because he found that the pain caused by separation is often in the disappointment that future plans will no longer come to fruition. He further did not allow himself to invest too much intrinsically again.

*There is also an element of self-protection there. You know, you have already had three times that it didn't work. That I put in a lot of effort and time, sacrificed things for the other. That never again. (Robert, 35–54)*

Also by avoiding minor extrinsic investments, like Mark (55–70) does, the consequences of separation were reduced:

*You know, I don't want to put my [tv] remote there [at her place] and that if we break up that I then have to... Look, those things, I don't want that.*

Many older LATs thus felt uncomfortable in one way or other to invest in their relationship and become committed for that reason. However, Saskia (55–70), similar to her stance on alternatives, denied the role played by investments in her commitment and instead stressed that her partner is worth to invest in, thereby linking it back to satisfaction. Likewise, the limited nature of Henk's (55–70) intrinsic investments can be attributed to an element of dissatisfaction. Namely, he cannot always talk very well with his partner, being on somewhat different levels intellectually. In addition, although his relationship

## Box 1

### Relationship history and investments in current relationship: Bert's story

Bert (35–54) has experienced two painful separations. This experience has made him afraid to let his new partner come close: “I was happy again with a really great woman, but at the same time knew that it can hurt really badly if it goes wrong.” His partner had wanted to cohabit, whereas he preferred to maintain the safe territory that he had created for himself and his children after his second failed co-residential relationship. After several years together, he eventually agreed to her buying the house right next to his own. However, it was one step too much for him when she additionally proposed to remove the fence that separates their gardens: “Then I suddenly get a little anxious. [...] I had something like, oh that fence you know, I was secretly already reinforcing it!” He realises that his desire to keep some distance, also materially, is grounded in his relationship history: “You get damaged a little bit [by a break-up]. Yes that sounds big, but in a relationship where all that in fact got very painful and difficult, like ‘yes but I have also painted part of this house!’, that kind of arguments. Well, you know, I will not let anyone help with the painting anymore, because apparently that means that suddenly 10% of that house is yours too, or something. [...] Yes, there is a bit of fear there.” Despite this, he has increasingly let go of these concerns and has now emotionally invested highly, and is more generally highly committed to his partner.



experience has not made him afraid to commit, it has made him more laconic in his current relationship.

*That all stays a bit superficial. In part because I have slightly had it, you could say, with all those relationships. [...] So if you then do start a relationship again, it is perhaps with a little less energy and less conviction. That's possible. Yes, you then no longer have that passion you had at young age, expecting golden mountains, but you perhaps sobered up by things that have happened.* (Henk, 55–70)

The older participants who, as an exception, did not feel held back by their relationship experience indicated to have emotionally invested and felt that this contributed to their commitment, although mostly to their emotional attachment, not to the importance of the future continuation of their relationship.

#### 4.5. Social support

Most participants said that their family and friends approved of or at least accepted their partner. However, they generally perceived the influence of this social support to be limited. Approval was felt to be reassuring and/or convenient, for example for family gatherings. Still, they generally believed that if their family and friends had disapproved of their partner, this would not have affected their relationship or commitment. Yet, the effect of such an alternative scenario of disapproval may have been difficult to imagine.

Younger participants expressed that support from friends and family was somewhat important and influential. Nevertheless, few of them attached high value to this and said that it made them feel more committed to their partner. Erik (20–34) explained this as follows:

*If they would disapprove I might think: "hmm, what am I missing?" But the fact that they think, "well, this one is really nice!", reinforces my feeling.*

Older participants in particular said that the influence of social support was limited:

*When you're younger, then all that matters, but when you're older, it really does not make a difference.* (Coby 55–70)

The fact that some older participants were not even aware of the opinion of family and friends reflects this. Others were very well aware that their children from a previous relationship were not supportive of their current partner. Although they reported that this did not cause doubt about their partner choice or diminish commitment to their partner, it was an extra reason to not live together with both their partner and children. The participants wanted to offer their children a safe, stable haven after one or multiple separations and moves, wanted to raise their children without the interference of a new partner, did not want to burden their new partner with their pubertal children, or did not want to burden their children with a new partner. This is in line with the results of De Jong Gierveld and Merz (2013), which show that children clearly affect repartnered parents' decision-making about living arrangements. Children try to protect the boundaries of their family, and parents try to preserve the ties with their children.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

To better understand the implications and meanings of living-apart-together as a modern partner relationship arrangement, this paper has explored commitment and its underlying determinants in LAT relationships, using an extended version of the Investment Model of Commitment (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult et al., 2011; Sprecher, 1988). This theoretical framework has driven the exploration of the way LATs evaluate their *satisfaction* with, *alternatives* to, *investments* in and *social support* for their relationship. In addition, the interlinkages between these evaluations, LATs' commitment, choice to live apart and plans for the future were considered.

Although experiences of commitment were diverse, most LATs in this study were emotionally highly attached to their partner, which could largely be attributed to satisfying aspects about their partner or relationship and to having emotionally invested in their relationship. However, participants' commitment to maintaining their relationship in the future was less strong and clear-cut. Participants emphasised the large margin of uncertainty when it comes to the future and the central importance of relationship quality and satisfaction above all. The notion of a life-long partnership was generally not valued very highly. In that sense, Jamieson et al. (2002, p. 356) may be right to speak of a reduced "willingness to create and honour life-long partnerships", although we would suggest phrasing it as a reduced *belief* and *interest* in life-long partnerships in the case of LATs. These experiences of commitment seem to be well captured by Giddens' (1991) notion of "pure relationships", in which autonomy and emotional commitment are centralised, and which are entered and maintained purely for the sake of love and personal satisfaction.

Of the four theoretical determinants shaping commitment, relationship satisfaction seems to be central for individuals in LAT relationships, together with emotional investments. Not only was satisfaction described as directly contributing to commitment, it also influenced perceptions of alternatives and the extent of LATs' investments in their relationship. Extrinsic investments, social support and quality of alternatives were generally perceived to play no or only a minor influential role. However, this could possibly be explained in part on the basis of social desirability and/or reduction of cognitive dissonance.

Besides these four determinants, one's life course stage in terms of prior relationship experiences and life experience more in general has arisen from the interviews as a central factor shaping the way in which LATs experienced commitment and perceived the determinants, as well as the choice for LAT. Younger LATs had idealistic views on relationships, and cohabitation and children were part of their vision of the future, even though marriage mostly was not. Those who were older and more experienced in life and love tended to have a less idealistic and more practical conception of relationships, sometimes to their own regret. They lived apart to enjoy their regained freedom and independence, and/or to limit the consequences of a potential separation, which, they had learnt, is unfortunately a realistic scenario. For that reason, they did not want to marry again, and they saw LAT as an arrangement for the unknown or very long term. Either intentionally or not, they found themselves less oriented towards the future of their relationship. They had learnt to be accepting of their partner's negative personality traits, saw few attractive alternatives at their age, frequently avoided to invest much in their relationship, and cared less about social approval. "Laconicism" (casualness or indifference) is a term that frequently came forward. LAT, with the associated limited extrinsic investments, was a strategy to limit commitment for several older participants who feared to commit again after one or several painful break-ups.

Whether LAT is a stage or state in the union formation process (see also discussions by Duncan & Phillips, 2010; Liefbroer et al., 2015) seems largely dependent on an individual's stage in the life course. For older participants, LAT was often a (semi-)permanent state without clear intentions to "progress" towards co-residence or marriage. Younger participants saw living apart as a more temporary arrangement, a stage, even though not necessarily intending to live together in the foreseeable future. In some ways, stage LATs can be regarded as similar to dating or steady boyfriend/girlfriend relationships (Lewin, 2017b). However, two characteristics distinguish stage LATs from traditional dating or boyfriend/girlfriend relationships: first, the long-term and established nature of the couple relationships (Duncan & Phillips, 2011); second, LATs' often open-minded and flexible attitude towards the relationship, not per se focussing on cohabitation or marriage as an end goal of a union formation process.

To some extent, this study's findings might be specific to the

Netherlands, in particular the reported risk-avoidance behaviour related to fear of separation and the minor role of marriage in the discussions of future plans. Similarly, cohabitation was described as a risk-avoidance strategy and alternative to marriage in Dutch focus groups (Hiekel & Keizer, 2015). This finding was particularly strong for the Netherlands in comparison to other European countries, possibly related to the wide range of legal arrangements available for formalising relationships besides marriage (Perelli-Harris et al., 2014). Nevertheless, risk-avoidance sentiments were also reported in qualitative studies on LAT relationships in other countries (e.g. Duncan et al., 2013; Levin & Trost, 1999). The rejection of or carelessness about marriage appears to be connected to awareness among both young and old of the realistic possibility of separation, and the unpredictability of the future. Perceptions of divorce as being very realistic discourage marriage in many European countries, but in the Netherlands in particular (Perelli-Harris, Berrington, Sánchez Gassen, Galezewska, & Holland, 2017). In any case, the results can be more appropriately generalised to western European countries, where LAT is an alternative mostly for those who have previously experienced union dissolution, than to eastern European countries, where LAT is an arrangement mainly chosen by the highly educated elite (Liefbroer et al., 2015).

This study has some limitations. The topics of commitment and partner relationships are very sensitive. An effort was made to identify and limit socially desirable answers, post-hoc rationalisation of behaviour and reduction of cognitive dissonance between attitudes and behaviour, but these can never be completely excluded. Furthermore, although the choice to interview individuals rather than couples was well-considered, it does limit this study to the views of only one partner.

Further research could explore commitment focussing on within-couple differences and dynamics instead. Another interesting focus for further research could be on LATs with serious health limitations, who may display distinctive pathways to commitment. It would also be interesting to compare commitment experiences across different countries, possibly using large-scale surveys such as the Generations and Gender surveys. Different welfare systems, legal partnership arrangements and societal values (e.g. collectivism or individualism, level of gender equality) could yield different commitment experiences and decision-making about living arrangements. Finally, repeated interviews over time could yield interesting insights in the development of LAT relationships.

Notwithstanding the limitations, the present study has shown the relevance of the concept of commitment in discussions about LAT. Particularly the determinants relationship satisfaction and size of investments greatly assist in our understanding of the meaning of and choice for LAT. In a context of great relationship instability and increasing emphasis on personal development, autonomy and satisfaction, LAT may become a long-term prelude and an alternative to co-residence for many. Similar to how growing relationship instability can be linked to increases in cohabitation (Perelli-Harris et al., 2017) as a strategy of risk-avoidance (Hiekel & Keizer, 2015), it could also result in more people opting for LAT in the future, either temporarily to ensure partner compatibility or permanently, being doubtful about long-term commitment; possibly even as a context for fertility.

## Declarations of interest

None.

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